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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to assess the ability of 4-year-olds to make differentiated judgments of characteristics of their nursery school classmates. A paired-associates sociometric task, a technique that does not rely heavily on verbal skills and is reliable with young children, was used to obtain these judgments. Children were presented with all possible pairs of pictures of class members and were asked to use these pairs to respond to each of four questions. The questions tapped sociometric preference, a cognitive skill, and two aspects of classroom behavior. Participants were 11 boys and 8 girls, averaging 55 months of age at the time of the first session. Testing was repeated in the fall and spring to assess changes over time. Additionally, test-retest reliability was assessed. Results indicated intraindividual consistency and interindividual agreement concerning children chosen, but no differential response to the four questions was found. Instead, children rated by teachers as being more popular in class were usually selected as having each of the four characteristics. Little change in these patterns occurred over the school year. The results were seen as a reflection of the second stage of a proposed three-phase model of the development of children's peer concepts. (Author/RH)

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Preschool Children's Concepts of Their Peers

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Abstract

The study assessed the ability of 4-year-olds to make differentiated judgments of characteristics of their nursery-school classmates. The technique used to obtain these judgments, one that does not rely heavily on verbal skills and that is reliable with young children, was a paired-associates sociometric task. Children were presented with all possible pairs of pictures of members of their class and were asked to use them to respond to each of four questions, tapping sociometric preference, a cognitive skill, and two aspects of classroom behavior. Participants were 11 boys and 8 girls, averaging 55 months of age at the time of the first session. The members of the class showed intra-individual consistency and inter-individual agreement concerning children chosen; however, they did not choose differentially in response to the four questions. Instead, the same children were usually selected as having each of the four characteristics; these were children rated by teachers as more popular in the class. Little change in these patterns occurred from fall to spring. This study is seen as an initial effort to assess a proposed three-phase model of the development of children's peer concepts.

Preschool Children's Concepts of Their Peers

Over recent years, researchers in social development have made a strong case for attending to the roles that children's peer relations play in the development of social competence and social behaviors (Asher, 1978; Asher, Renshaw, & Hymel, 1982; Hartup, 1979). From both descriptive, correlational studies (Roff, Sells, & Golden, 1972; Ullman, 1957) and from intervention studies (Furman, Rahe, & Hartup, 1979; Strain, 1977), it has become obvious that peers can meet unique needs and provide learning experiences that parents and teachers, by way of their age, characteristics, and roles vis-a-vis the child, are not able to fulfill. Emphasis on the importance of peers leads directly to research on the nature of peer interactions, the development of social skills, and investigations of developmental changes in the child that will have effects on the nature of his or her peer interactions. The present study was concerned with one aspect of the child's social cognitive skill that we expected would have strong implications for social behavior. In contrast to much of the literature on social cognition, we were concerned not with children's general awareness or knowledge of others, but rather, with their more specific, experientially-based concepts of peers with whom they interact on a day-to-day basis.

Our study originated from informal observations reported to us by a nursery school director and her teachers, which suggested that preschoolers were able to identify peers who were competent in particular achievement areas, such as number skills. Their observations set us to wondering how general such abilities were in preschoolers, and also led to a concern for what it means to have a mature concept of another, fairly intimately-known person. According to research on person perception by Livesley and Bromley (1973) and others, a mature concept of another person allows one to consider various different and uncorrelated attributes of the other. One who is liked, for example, can be seen as helpful,

but not particularly good at cognitive skills; or another might be viewed as highly competent, helpful to others, but not particularly likeable.

We wondered if young children would show such differentiated concepts of their peers, and we set out to study this with a group of 4-year-olds attending a pre-school class. In order to assess these children's concepts of their classmates, we used a sociometric procedure that has been employed successfully with pre-schoolers by Vaughn and Waters (1981). It is a paired comparisons method, in which the child is exposed to pictures of classmates, in pairs, and is asked to choose one of the pictures in answer to a question. Vaughn and Waters have used this as a sociometric technique, asking the question "Whom do you like better?", and have shown test-retest reliabilities superior to those obtained with more traditional picture board peer-nomination sociometrics.

We used this procedure to assess one peer attribute that a child might include in a concept of a classmate--"likeability" or what others have termed "popularity," but also extended the procedure to include several additional questions that should measure other peer characteristics, including a cognitive attribute: "Who knows numbers better?" and two aspects of classroom behavior: "Who is quieter?" and "Who helps the teacher the most?"

Questions of this kind have been used in peer assessment studies as a way of measuring the characteristics of the child nominated. We used the answers instead as a way of assessing the cognitive skill of the child doing the task, in order to see 1) how much children would differentiate their choices according to the question asked; 2) how much children in the group would show a consensus in their choices and 3) how well their selections would agree with our criterion measure of children's characteristics--in this case, the reports of the two classroom teachers.

We worked with a group of 19 children, 11 boys and 8 girls, from a

university-based preschool classroom. Children averaged 55 months of age (S.D. = 3.2) when they were first tested in November of the school year. At that time, the 19 children had shared a classroom for approximately 3 months. Twelve of them had been classmates at the same preschool for a 9-month period during the previous academic year, so that there was the likelihood of well-established group relations and presumably, well-established peer knowledge for many of the children in the group. The children were tested in November and again in March, in order to assess changes in concepts that might occur over time. In each session a child was asked to respond to 171 pairs of pictures of each child in the class paired with each other child. Only one question was asked during a single test session of about 30 minutes duration; thus, each child was seen for four sessions in the fall and an additional four sessions in spring. Also, each child was seen for a brief fifth session in fall and again in spring, in order that test-retest reliability of their choices could be assessed. Reliability was measured by selecting randomly a set of 15 to 19 picture pairs for which the child had answered a question approximately one week earlier and asking the question a second time. Reliability was calculated as the number of agreements divided by the total number of pairs in the set. For the fall testing, reliabilities were as follows: .73 agreement between first and second testings for well-liked; .70 for helping the teacher; .63 for quiet, and .62 for knowing numbers. In spring, comparable reliabilities were .68, .71, .68, and .69 for the four questions, respectively. These values are consistent with those reported in the literature. (For example, Vaughn and Waters (1981) found test-retest agreement for liking to range from .45 to 1.00, with an average agreement of .75.) We are encouraged that this procedure, although time-consuming, does more reliably tap young children's perceptions of their peers than does a traditional picture sociometric, and also requires minimal verbal skills, unlike other procedures that have been used to assess peer concepts.

Were the children able to differentiate their peers? Several procedures were used in data analysis to answer this question. First of all, we simply took frequency of choice scores representing how often each child was chosen by all of the children in answer to a given question. If the children differentiate their peers conceptually, we reasoned, then the correlations between these frequency scores should be very low. As indicated in Table 1, this was not the case for the fall testing. In fact, correlations were very high. (Pearson product moment correlation coefficients are reported. Results for rank order correlations are very much the same.) Subsequent efforts to answer the same question involved a more molecular examination of the data. It is typical in sociometric studies to find that children are more likely to choose same-sex peers as best-liked. In the present study, there was a consistent tendency for children to select same-sex peers for each of the four questions. (For example, in analyses of responses made by boys and girls to each question, we found a consistent preference by children for same-sex peers.) Therefore, the next step was to examine scores for girls choosing girls and boys choosing boys, independently. As indicated in Table 1, patterns here varied for boys and girls, with boys showing high correlations between total frequencies for each question. When girls were examined for their choices of girls, however, less substantial correlations appeared. These data were from the November testing. In spring, overall correlations remained very high, as did those for boys choosing boys. But in spring, girls' choices of girls also showed high intercorrelations of choices made across all 4 questions. For girls, then, there appears to be a development over the year toward a more "stereotypic" or undifferentiated view of their classmates. (These correlations are based on summary scores that are the totals of choices, including choices of self, made by all children. Analyses were also made using proportion scores in which choices of self were omitted, and

findings were essentially the same.)

Given that the children, as a group, did NOT seem to differentiate peer attributes, on what basis were they reacting? We asked the children's teachers to complete the same question procedure that the children had experienced, except that teachers were asked to respond to the sociometric question in terms of children's popularity with their classmates. The teachers chose as we had expected, in that, first of all, they agreed well on responses made to the same question: for helps teacher, r = .91; for popularity, r = .82; for knowing numbers, r = .61; and for being quiet, r = .50. Secondly, as shown in Table 2, teachers did not react in the same manner to all four questions. Both teachers tended to indicate similarity between ratings of helping the teacher and knowing numbers, but otherwise, teacher choices for the separate questions were independent.

If we view the teacher reports as an external criterion of children's actual characteristics, they are useful in identifying the basis of the children's choices. As shown in Table 3, children's choices for each question were related to teachers' choices of children who are popular or well-liked by their classmates. Relationships on the diagonal for child and teacher choices of the same attributes are very low for the cognitive and classroom behavior questions. But correlations between children's choices and teacher reports of popularity are significant for all four relationships shown in Table 3.

Results to this point are based on scores summarized across the classroom group. How well do they describe what individual children are doing? The response patterns of eight individual cases are presented in Table 2. The first four, Girls 5 and 7 and Boys 3 and 4, are fairly typical cases, used to illustrate patterns of generally high correlation (low differentiation) across items, with little change from fall to spring in the nature of these patterns. Additional analyses also indicated high stability from November to March in the particular

children selected for each question. The other four cases (Girls 1 and 3 and Boys 1 and 7) were selected for display because they were, in fall, exceptions to the overall pattern. They showed low relationships between responses to different questions. By spring, three of the four had moved toward higher consistency of choices across questions. The low correlations for these four cases in fall probably do not reflect mature differentiated concepts, but rather, random responses to the questions, since 1) teacher ratings were independent of the children's fall responses; 2) the shift from fall to spring probably reflected development rather than regression; and 3) several of these children were described by teachers, peers, or themselves as low in popularity, "likeability," and sometimes as low on other attributes, as well. These cases do show the need for supplementary information to aid interpretation of correlational patterns, however, something that we are pursuing in continuations of this work.

In summary, then, our initial questions obtain a less positive answer than our nursery school director and teachers had expected. What we may see here is the manifestation of early phases of a developmental progression, from 1) completely idiosyncratic choices of friends, similarly nominated for each of the four questions, to 2) emerging congruence of judgments by most or all members of a class, so that some children are selected frequently and others less so, but still with little differentiation on the basis of individual characteristics, to 3) a mature, differentiated concept of the other, in which choices are based on shared knowledge about others in the group that takes into account individual characteristics. The 4-year-olds seen in the present study were predominantly in the second phase at both fall and spring testings, in that they showed some consensus in their choices but no differentiation on the basis of questions asked. The girls' choices of other girls, as well as the idiosyncratic four cases described above, showed changes that may represent movement from the first to the second phase.

We feel that this approach is useful as a way of gaining a better understanding of the development of children's concepts of their peers. The research may also have implications for interventions designed to increase peer acceptance of socially isolated children--by finding ways to help children achieve more differentiated concepts of their peers, we might be able to increase their acceptance of others who have some different or negative characteristics. Finally, this work implies that some caution may be necessary in interpreting data obtained from young children using "Guess Who" or other peer rating procedures (cf., Asher & Hymel, 1981). The basis upon which the child responds may not be the one that the experimenter presumes is being used.

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Table 1

Relationships Between Choices Made by Children Answering Four Questions Concerning Classmates' Attributes

(a) Entire Class

	Helps Teacher	Quiet	Knows Numbers
Like Better	.810	.841	.861
Helps Teacher		.889	.927
Quiet			.907

(b) Girls Choosing Girls

	Helps Teacher	Quiet	Knows Numbers
Like Better	.303	.594	.427
Helps Teacher		.788	.629
Quiet			.649

(c) Boys Choosing Boys

	Helps Teacher	Quiet	Knows Numbers
Like Better	.933	.966	.950
Helps Teacher		.941	.970
Quiet			.941

Correlation coefficient significant at $p < .01$ (N=19) is .575.

Table 2

Intercorrelations Between Choices Made by Teachers and

Selected Children Assessed in Fall and Spring

Relationships Assessed:		Like-Help	Like-Quiet	Like-Number	Help-Quiet	Help-Number	Quiet-Number
Choices by							
Teacher 1		-.182	.030	.259	-.250	.509	-.285
Teacher 2		.067	-.535	.183	.202	.661	-.135
Girl 5	Fall	.612	.699	.768	.837	.811	.742
	Spring	.600	.569	.740	.816	.671	.738
Girl 7	Fall	.914	.859	.938	.904	.956	.911
	Spring	.864	.862	.850	.940	.954	.954
Boy 3	Fall	.862	.646	.783	.751	.829	.865
	Spring	.859	.918	.921	.940	.923	.937
Boy 4	Fall	.930	.864	.916	.965	.882	.827
	Spring	.901	.915	.899	.929	.937	.901
Girl 1	Fall	-.378	-.476	-.086	.832	.459	.322
	Spring	.803	.739	.870	.779	.880	.724
Girl 3	Fall	.773	.483	.562	.612	.481	.318
	Spring	.534	.468	.689	.603	.777	.813
Boy 1	Fall	.383	.332	.463	.424	.406	-.011
	Spring	-.260	-.119	.045	.431	.317	.497
Boy 7	Fall	.543	.373	-.017	-.066	.444	-.016
	Spring	-.148	.827	.701	-.260	-.297	.843

Table 3

Relationships Between Teachers' and Children's Choices on Each Question

Children's Choices:	Teachers' Choices (Summed for Two Teachers)			
	Popular	Helps Teacher	Quiet	Knows Numbers
Like Better	.577	-.123	-.246	-.051
Helps Teacher	.688	-.025	-.264	.105
Quiet	.708	-.006	-.275	.151
Knows Numbers	.740	-.021	-.255	.106